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ART AND RELIGION.

JAMES H. LEUBA.

AESTHETIC enjoyment and the art impulse have been associated with religion at almost every stage of its development. Crude artistic efforts appeared in connection with early religions in magico-religious dances, dramatic ceremonies and the making of fetishes. Greek religion and plastic art grew simultaneously, and in the hymns sung at the feast of Dionysos, Greek comedy and tragedy found their origin. Under the stimulus of religious inspiration, painting and architecture reached in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a beauty and an impressiveness hardly again attained.

In the discussion of the connection of art with religion one may rule out at once the supposition that one is necessary to the other. Sufficient proof for this is to be found in those types of religion which repudiate æsthetic attractions. What, for instance, has art to do with the worship of the Friends? They value simplicity, dignity, solemnity; but they tolerate no architecture, no statuary, no pictures, no music.

Although the art impulse does not aim at the production of things of common utility, it is at first unavoidably connected with necessary or at least useful objects. As a matter of fact, it is only among civilized peoples that purely artistic creations exist: to create a beautiful object merely out of the desire to express oneself beautifully is a mark of a high degree of culture. In primitive life, art is in every instance an accessory, an adjunct of the useful. The art impulse was enticed into expression by the presence of objects produced under the compelling pressure of urgent needs. The arrow which gives death in order to preserve life offers its surface to the active hand in a moment of idleness, and decoration is born; the magic dance which assures

the success of the warriors reveals the delight of rhythmic movements, and artistic dancing comes into existence.

Religious ceremonies are among the useful activities which offer an opportunity to the art impulse. One may therefore expect art to accompany religion just as it accompanies arrow and pottery making. But let it be observed that clothing religion in beauty was not in early times intended as a lure by those interested in its success. Later, however, when men were more self-conscious and more sophisticated, the association of art with religion may very well, here and there, have become a policy. A more or less clear consciousness of the value of art to religion has, no doubt, been operative in producing the magnificent pageantry of the Roman Church. So much one may fairly admit without agreeing with von Hartmann when he maintains that "the admission of art into religious services has never been anything else but a secular bait to entice the great mass of persons, in whom the religious sentiment has not been strong enough by itself, to support and prolong much devotion and contemplation without the aid of such external means of excitement." How inadequate and unjust this opinion is, becomes evident as soon as a psychological examination of the relation of art to religion is undertaken.

The natural tendency to beautify religious objects and rites or, more generally, to give æsthetic value to whatever is brought into existence because of its utility, is closely related to the propensity of rendering enjoyable any pursuit in which one may have to engage. Does not the man from the country who comes to town on business usually contrive to make the trip a pleasure one? Everywhere religious ceremonies have served as a nucleus about which were gathered attractions of the most varied kind, above all, those dependent upon a concourse of people. Jane Harrison tells us, for instance, in *Prolegomena to a Study of Greek Religion* that the religious ceremony called *Anthesteria*, celebrated in honor of Dionysos, lasted three days. On

the first day they broached the new wine and made an offering to the god. "The casks once opened, the revel set in and lasted through the next day and on to a third." On the second day took place the august ceremony of the wedding of the wife of the King Archon to the god Dionysos. On the third day there was a dramatic contest. "It was in intent a three days' fair. A 'Pardon' in Brittany of to-day affords perhaps the nearest modern analogy."

The desire for enjoyment favors the more attractive religions at the expense of the less attractive. If one is to labor for the salvation of one's soul, why not give the preference to an effective religion which is at the same time beautiful? Frederic Bastiat, a distinguished convert to the Roman Catholic faith, exclaims, "For the rest, this religion is so beautiful, that it seems to me possible to love it so as to attain happiness in this very world." To one as sensitive as Bastiat to æsthetic impressions, attending church may be worth while even though nothing should be further from one's mind than religion.

Among the answers I received to a *Questionnaire* regarding religious life, several express a preference for the Episcopal rather than for the Presbyterian church "because of the æsthetic pleasure derived from the service." Fine music, imposing architecture, beautiful pictures, are frequently mentioned in these documents as reasons for church attendance. One writes, for instance, "I prefer a religious service of much formalism. I have no religious feelings in public except as I am surrounded by the noble in architecture, in coloured glass, in the pageantry of the church. I have knelt at some shrine in walking through the country abroad with religious feeling, and I have done likewise at some altar in a cathedral. I prefer the Romish worship to any other on this account; but I refrain from having anything to do with it because I think it dangerous to liberty." Perhaps the "religious feelings" above mentioned represent merely an æsthetic emotion. Those persons are not rare, who, keenly sensitive to beauty and indifferent to religion in the proper sense of the term, imagine that the delight they find in

beautiful religious ceremonies is a religious experience. They are like the color-blind who use names of colors they do not perceive. This may be true of the person whose only "religious" experiences come to him through music: "Sacred music affects me powerfully. It is physical pain and sweetest rapture—causing extreme exhilaration and depression."

The æsthetic charm of the Anglican service is admirably conveyed in the following passage from Coats' *Types of English Piety*: "A characteristic feature of sacerdotal worship is its whole-hearted delight in symbolism and love of art." "When a Church of England service is well rendered, dull indeed must be the soul that would fail to worship. The stateliest architecture, the sweetest and most solemn music, the chaste language, the goodliest vestments, the most seemly postures, and the most suggestive ceremonies are all brought into requisition to assist the sluggish soul in its flight toward God. Surely, if a man's spirit could take wing above the earth, it would be under these conditions. The eye is wooed heavenwards by soaring columns or by storied glass. The ear is won by melodies that either melt to penitence or stir to praise. The statues on the walls or the brasses beneath the feet speak of the sainted dead, and beckon to those good things whereto they have attained. Even the reverberating echoes and the restful shade invite the tranquil thoughts and solemn vows. . . . It is not surprising that a worshipper accustomed to this kind of devotion, with its rich and multifarious sensuous appeal, should regard with infinite pity and even scorn the bare and jejune worship of Evangelical Protestantism. How naked and graceless and irreverent it must appear."

Emotions and especially those produced by great and magnificent scenery favor the naïve, animistic interpretation of nature. There are persons who at the sight of Niagara Falls have to restrain themselves from kneeling down. These get their most vivid religious experience

from "the panorama of nature's great and impressive powers, lofty peaks, fertile valleys, parched deserts, mighty streams, deep canyons, active volcanoes, and not least, the swaying, struggling conglomeration called humanity."

The religious influence of such objects is in great part due to the disorganizing effect of emotions upon the mind. The first and immediate result of an emotional seizure is to interrupt the reigning train of thought, to displace the reflective attitude and the recently acquired knowledge which make possible the mechanical interpretation of nature. The mind relapses to the animistic, the pre-critical standpoint. The noises of the forest may become the voice of God when awe and reverence have taken possession of the soul. The very fluttering of the leaves which in a sober, critical mood would suggest merely the action of a breeze, may seem charged with a divine intimation. This after all is no more surprising than the sudden appearance of the burglar in the mind of one hearing in the dead of night unaccustomed noises. Religious biographies abound in illustrations of the advantage religion gains from emotional disturbance. Here is one example taken from *A Modern Pilgrim's Progress*: "In times of deep fear or trouble I forgot all about philosophy, ignored all evolutionary theories, and cried aloud to the God of my childhood. On one occasion I remember being sore pressed by a great trouble which threatened to crush out all the joy of my life. All night I paced up and down my room, dreading the news the morning light would bring.

"I had prayed and no help had come. In my room was a picture of Raphael's Madonna, and as I stood before it, in my despair, there came the thought of the millions who sought Mary's aid. Kneeling I implored her, if she really existed and had power, to use it on my behalf. Morning dawned, and, worn out, I fell asleep kneeling on the ground."

In so far as the domain of art lies in the sphere of feeling and emotion, reflection is antagonistic to art. The most dangerous enemy of artistic creation is the critical habit of

thought. It is also the most dangerous enemy of those religions which have lagged behind the knowledge of the times.

The Greeks conceived their gods as perfect in form, and thus they tried to represent them. As perfect plastic beauty was one of the gods' chief attributes, an Athenian could hardly think of beauty without his thoughts ascending to his divinities. But even when the anthropomorphic conception of God is rejected, plastic beauty may have for some a religious value. In his *Entretiens sur l'Art*, Auguste Rodin says of the three goddesses of the Parthenon, commonly called the Parcæ, "We see here merely three women seated, but their attitude is so serene, so august that they seem to be part of something enormous and invisible. Above them hovers the great mystery: Reason, immaterial, eternal, to which all nature obeys and of which they are themselves the divine servants."

The Christian God shorn of plastic beauty acquires that of moral perfection. He is the Infinite One in whom all discords are harmonized. The close connection that exists between the emotions awakened by beautiful objects and by this higher idea of the divine, is clearly realized by several of my correspondents. One writes, for instance, after stating that the emotion produced by beauty is not a religious emotion, "In so far as beauty and harmony form any part of the ideal, and in so far as natural beauty affords any impulse toward higher living, toward the realization of the ideal, I believe that I should class those æsthetic thoughts as religious."

Not only are the impressions made by the beautiful and by the idea of God in some respects similar, but the attitudes of æsthetic enjoyment and of religious adoration are themselves substantially alike. "The attitude of mind which one must gain, if one is to appreciate æsthetic works, is an attitude of receptivity, and almost altogether of passive receptivity, an attitude of watching for effects from without, of absorbed attention to these effects. In the

thorough enjoyment of powerful æsthetic effects, we stand ‘entranced,’ as the saying goes.” The expressions “passive receptivity” and “absorbed attention” used by Marshall in describing the state of artistic appreciation, are the very ones by which the Mystics describe the state of union with God. The close resemblance between the art devotee when absorbed in the object of his admiration, and the worshipper possessed by his God, is not to be gainsaid. Ecstatic absorption in God and the delight of *Einfühlung*, to use the term by which the Germans characterize the æsthetic attitude are, psychologically considered, similar states. No wonder then if art enjoyment and religious ecstasy have been confused.

We may therefore not say, in the phrase of von Hartmann, that in religion art is merely “a secular bait.” On the contrary, art is in several ways a natural associate of religion: it is natural for man to beautify that which he must do, or possess, for utility’s sake; certain religious conceptions, in particular the god-idea, provide subjects for, and inspiration to artistic creation; the anthropomorphic gods are conceived of quite naturally as beautiful and so also, in a higher sense, the Perfect One; and, finally, the æsthetic emotion is in some respects similar to the emotion awakened by God when he is conceived of as the All-Perfect—absorption in the beautiful and the blissful communion with God have essential elements in common.

In some of the relations I have indicated art appears as the helper of religion; in others, art is the dependent partner. The stimulus it receives from religion is peculiarly obvious when one realizes the incentive given the art impulse by the anthropomorphic conception of divine beings. It would have been strange indeed, if the representation of the deities in fairest forms had not been the loftiest aim of great artists.

This influence of religion upon art is, however, not of a kind peculiar to religion. Wherever the springs of life are

touched, wherever the imagination is fired, art finds its food. In this respect, therefore, art and religion stand in a relation similar to that existing between art and any other impressive activity. To-day, especially in the United States, great material resources, and the manifestations of vast power in machinery, industry and commerce, are frequent sources of architectural and pictorial art.

If art remains in Christian countries an important ally of religion, it has almost ceased to derive support from it. Little would be lost to the art of the nineteenth century if whatever it owes to religious inspiration were to be eliminated. The loss of support is due in part, no doubt, to the disappearance of novelty from the religious objects amenable to artistic treatment; and, to a greater degree, to a loss of those beliefs that were a source of artistic inspiration.

When, despite its value to religion, art is rejected by religion, it is mainly because of certain antagonisms between them. The aim of ethical religion and the purpose of art are, after all, far from identical. It is the fear that the symbol, the image, the form usurps the place of the reality, and still more the protest of the puritanic conscience against the egoistic delight with which the artist is content, that condemn the Protestant to worship within bare walls.

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